

# Senior staff: what attracts them and why they stay

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*By Jodi Andrews*

We all know that one of the most valuable resources in the clinical research industry is staff. Recruiting and training budgets are high, and we depend on knowledgeable staff to manage and monitor our trials. Yet it is commonly accepted that a clinical monitor will only stay with a company for about three years. If this doesn't compromise the quality of work produced, it at least impacts the continuity of communication within the study team, between team and sponsor, and between the team and sites, which can cause disruptions during crucial project periods. How can biopharmas attract and retain senior staff that will stay with the company and provide their expertise to ongoing and upcoming trials?

Some companies have a history of maintaining relatively junior monitoring staff. This falls to the bottom line by keeping salaries lower, but incurs other costs, such as training and retraining, higher discrepancy rates due to unfamiliarity with a therapeutic area and standards and disruptions in communication within and between projects, to name a few. However, the functional requirements at all levels of the monitoring job family are the same--regulations must be followed, data must be monitored and the same reports must be generated. Junior staff are not as capable of providing these services at the same quality level as more experienced staff. While co-monitoring and training can go a long way toward remediating deficiencies, this often occurs only after the fact. Time and money that could have been more productively used are spent identifying and fixing problems, and providing re-training to staff and site personnel.

On the other hand, senior monitoring staff can provide stability, experience and support for trial sites and other team members. They know the ins and outs of regulations and have greater ability to spot problems at sites. Senior staff are more likely to anticipate issues and can contribute tracking and file maintenance suggestions that are beneficial to the team. As long as senior staff remain interested and feel supported, they will make a valuable contribution to any team.

There are, of course, some challenges to attracting and retaining senior staff in the current economy. Many monitors receive several calls a month from recruiters hoping to entice them away to new positions. Recruiters motivate with both the carrot (better benefits, pensions and stock options, which are being reduced in all industries these days) and the stick (uncertainty of what expiring patents will mean for large companies). Staff members who have been happy where they are may be intrigued by the possibility of an easier schedule, more flexibility and/or more recognition. Piquing the individual's

interest (if you want to hire them) or keeping their interest (if you want to retain them) often depends on key factors: an atmosphere of open communication, a solid internal infrastructure, the ability to provide interesting work, more recognition and a good compensation plan.

- **Open communication:** Even in a large company, where communication may be more formalized and somewhat prescribed, a manager can create an atmosphere of attention and accessibility for their direct reports. Monitors are typically busy with travel and reporting, and they value a manager who has a sense of their strengths and contributions, and who pays attention to their workload. An employee is much more likely to have a candid conversation about with someone with whom they have a good working relationship than with someone they feel is remote from their day-to-day work. This helps managers plan realistically and work toward providing enriching work experiences to those employees who seek them.
- **Infrastructure:** Monitors working from their home offices often feel they are managing their schedules and meeting their deadlines alone. A company that provides structure for them with clear procedures, forms and administrative and IT support, goes a long way toward freeing them to do the job they are hired to do. SOPs (standard operating procedures) and forms that are clear, concise and easy to access provide a solid structure. The importance of good IT support can't be emphasized too much: monitors have a variety of expertise in the IT area, and easy accessibility to someone who can troubleshoot their issues--for instance, lost remote access during a datalock--is invaluable. In addition, since regional CRAs (clinical research associates) travel so much, it's essential to have a program in place to help manage travel time and project workload.
- **Interesting work:** Monitors vary in the experiences they desire during their career. The astute manager will discuss whether they want to remain working on Phase III trials in the same therapeutic area where they feel comfortable, or whether they would like more varied experience, which may include Phase I, lead, or new therapeutic area work. Any change in assignment needs to fit within the company's parameters, but in many cases there are opportunities to vary people's assignments to meet their interests. An employee who is interested in their daily work and feels valued for their contribution is less likely be attracted to other situations.
- **Recognition:** Monitors, like everyone else, like the intangibles of respect and feeling valued. A good manager and/or company should acknowledge contributions (small and large) either in newsletters and emails or during meetings and/or conference calls. Acknowledgment from the management team on a job well done goes a long way toward employee retention.
- **Compensation plan:** Most monitors are dedicated professionals who take pride in a job well done, and enjoy being part of the process of bringing new health options to the larger community. Of course, they want to be compensated in keeping with their experience and contributions. Biopharmas will benefit from providing competitive compensation. However, rate of pay seldom generates loyalty in the same way other management parameters will. All forms of recognition--including financial--work together to encourage longevity.

Each company will have its own plan for employee retention, and some companies value retention more than others. However, given the advantages of expertise, ease of integration with teams, and continuity of communication within and between projects, the benefits of attracting and retaining senior staff are worth the development of strong procedures and infrastructure to support them.

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